

# 29 Conditional sentences

Conditional sentences are used to describe real or hypothetical results of real or hypothetical situations. They can use many different verb forms.

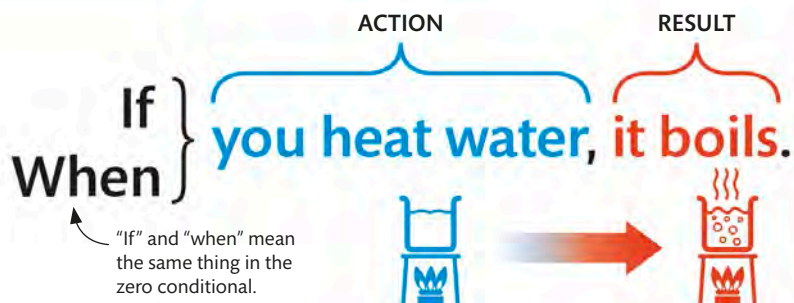
See also:

Present simple **1** Imperatives **6**

Past simple **7** Future with "will" **18**

## 29.1 THE ZERO CONDITIONAL

The zero conditional, also called the "real" conditional, refers to things that are always true. It is used to describe the direct result of an action.



## FURTHER EXAMPLES

**If you heat ice, it melts.**



**When you put a rock in water, it sinks.**



The result clause can go to the beginning of the sentence. The comma is removed in this case.

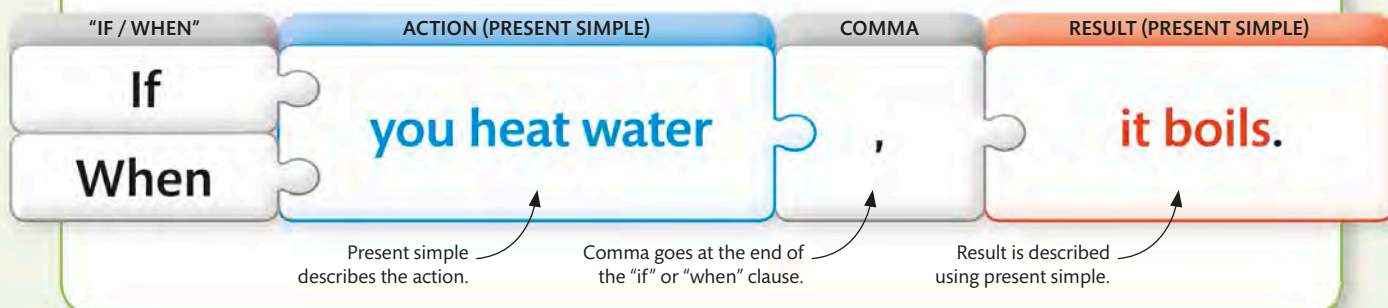
**If you drop an apple, it falls.**



**Oil floats when you pour it onto water.**

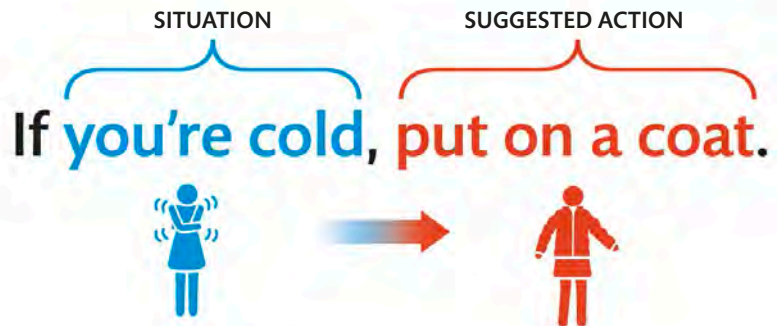


## HOW TO FORM



## 29.2 CONDITIONALS WITH IMPERATIVES

Imperatives can be used in conditional sentences. The "if" clause describes a hypothetical situation and the imperative clause describes what someone should do if that hypothetical situation actually happens.



### FURTHER EXAMPLES

If **you feel sick**, **call a doctor**.



If **the dog's hungry**, **feed him**.



If **the traffic is bad**, **cycle to work**.



If **the children behave badly**, **call me**.



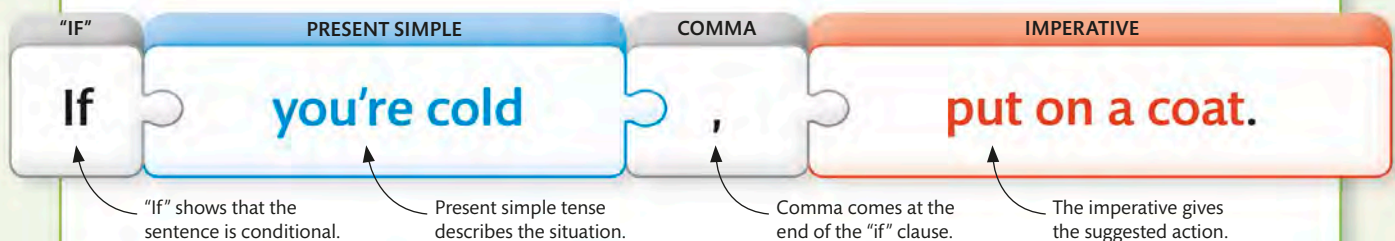
Negative  
Don't **stay up late** if **you're tired**.



The order is reversed, so there is no comma.  
Let me know if **you need help**.



### HOW TO FORM



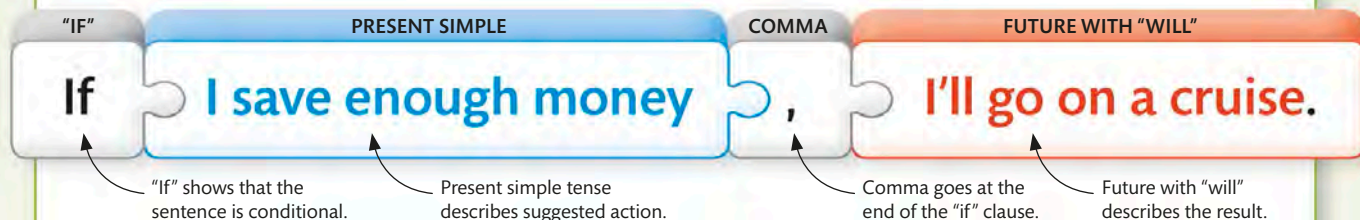
## 29.3 THE FIRST CONDITIONAL

The first conditional, also called the “future real” conditional, uses “if” to describe a realistic action that might lead to a future result.



### HOW TO FORM

The first conditional is usually introduced by an “if” clause, followed by the present simple. The future with “will” expresses the result.



### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**If I go jogging, I'll lose weight.**



**If it snows, I'll go skiing.**



**If we go to Africa, we'll go on safari.**



**If I get the job, I'll buy a new suit.**



**If I cook, will you do the dishes?**



**I won't go outside if it rains.**





## 29.4 THE SECOND CONDITIONAL

The second conditional, also called the “unreal” conditional, uses “if” to describe an unlikely or unreal action or event. The described result is also very unlikely.



### HOW TO FORM

The second conditional is usually introduced by an “if” clause with a past simple verb. “Would” or “could” plus the base form of the main verb expresses the result.



### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**If he wasn't so busy, he'd take a break.**



**If I moved to Scotland, I'd live in a cottage.**



**If I had more time, I could take up karate.**



**I'd call her if I knew her number.**



**If I saw a ghost, I would be terrified.**



**If I learned English, I could visit London.**



## 29.5 THE THIRD CONDITIONAL

The third conditional, also called the “past unreal” conditional, is used to describe unreal situations in the past. It is often used to express regret about the past because the hypothetical situation that it describes is now impossible as a consequence of another past action.



UNREAL PAST SITUATION

UNREAL PAST RESULT

**If we had left earlier, we would have caught the train.**

↖ This didn't happen.

↖ So this didn't happen either.

### FURTHER EXAMPLES



**If I had woken up on time,  
I would have done my hair.**



**If you had been wearing a coat,  
you might have stayed warm.**

↖ “Might” means this possibly  
would have happened.



**If I had studied harder,  
I could have been a doctor.**

↖ “Could” means this possibly  
would have happened.



**If I had known it was your birthday,  
I would have bought you a present.**

### HOW TO FORM

“IF”

“HAD” + PAST PARTICIPLE

“WOULD / COULD / MIGHT”

“HAVE” + PAST PARTICIPLE

**If**

**we had left earlier**

**, we would**

**have caught the train.**

↖ The “if” clause is the  
unreal past condition.

↖ Using different modals changes the  
certainty of the imagined result.

↖ The conditional clause  
is the unreal result.

## 29.6 THE MIXED CONDITIONAL

### SECOND CONDITIONAL

The second conditional is used to talk about hypothetical situations in the present.

#### PAST SIMPLE



If I didn't believe in astrology,  
I wouldn't read my horoscope.

"WOULD" + INFINITIVE

### THIRD CONDITIONAL

The third conditional is used to talk about hypothetical situations in the past.

#### PAST PERFECT



If I had known he was an Aquarius,  
I would not have gone out with him.

"WOULD" + "HAVE" + PAST PARTICIPLE

### MIXED CONDITIONAL



Mixed conditionals are usually used to talk about hypothetical present results of unreal past situations.

If you had been born a month earlier,  
you would be a Virgo like me.

Unreal past.

Unreal present.

### FURTHER EXAMPLES

If you hadn't forgotten to bring the keys,  
we wouldn't be locked out of the house.



Mixed conditionals refer to future situations when used with future time markers.

You would be starting at a new school tomorrow if you hadn't failed your exams.



Mixed conditionals are often used to express regret.

If I had finished my assignment sooner,  
I could be out with my friends today.



We would be on a beach in Greece by now if we hadn't missed our flight.





# 30 Other conditional sentences

English allows for some variations in conditional sentence structures. These give more information about the context of the conditional.

See also:

Future with "will" 18

Modal verbs 56

## 30.1 CONDITIONAL SENTENCES WITH MODAL VERBS

First, second, and third conditional sentences can use different modal verbs in their "result" clauses. These can be used to express uncertainty, possibility, or obligation, amongst other things.



### FIRST CONDITIONAL

In the first conditional, "will" can be replaced by a variety of modal verbs to talk about different ideas.

If I save enough money, I will buy a new car.

If I save enough money, I can buy a new car.

Different modal verbs can go here.

### SECOND CONDITIONAL

In the second conditional, "would" can be replaced by "could" or "might" to express ability, possibility, or uncertainty.

If I saved enough money, I would buy a new car.

If I saved enough money, I { could might } buy a new car.

### THIRD CONDITIONAL

In the third conditional, "would" can be replaced by "could" or "might" to express ability, possibility, or uncertainty.

If I had saved enough money, I would have bought a new car.

If I had saved enough money, I { could might } have bought a new car.

### 30.2 FIRST CONDITIONAL WITH "UNLESS"

"Unless" can be used instead of "if" in conditional sentences. "Unless" means "if... not," so the future result depends on the suggested action not happening.



**If you don't**  
**Unless you** } study hard, **you will fail your exams.**

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**If you don't**  
**Unless you** } get up now, **you'll be late for work.**



**I'll be angry** { **if he doesn't turn**  
**unless he turns** } that music down.



### 30.3 FORMAL THIRD CONDITIONAL

The third conditional can be made more formal by swapping "had" with the subject and dropping "if."



**If you had attended** the meeting, you would have met the manager.



**Had you attended** the meeting, you would have met the manager.

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**Had I worked** harder at school,  
I could have studied medicine.

**Had she woken up** earlier,  
she wouldn't have been late.

**Had you listened** to the directions,  
we would have arrived on time.

**Had we bought** that house,  
we couldn't have afforded this trip.



# 31 Conditional sentences overview

## 31.1 TYPES OF CONDITIONAL

**The zero conditional**  
is used to talk about situations that will always happen. It is used to talk about general truths.

PRESENT SIMPLE  
**If you play the violin out of tune, it sounds terrible.**  
PRESENT SIMPLE



**The second conditional**  
is used to talk about hypothetical situations that are very unlikely to happen, but are usually still possible.

PAST SIMPLE  
**If I practiced more, that song would sound better.**  
"WOULD" + BASE FORM



## 31.2 USING COMMAS IN CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

When the action comes before the result, a comma separates the two clauses of the conditional sentence. However, when the result comes first, no comma is used.

When **you freeze water**, **ice forms**.

A comma is used if the action comes first.

**Ice forms** when **you freeze water**.

The result can come at the beginning of the sentence.

"If" or "when" can sit between the action and result, without a comma.

There are four types of conditional sentences. The zero conditional refers to real situations, but the first, second, and third conditionals all refer to hypothetical situations.

See also:

Present simple **1** Past simple **7**

Past perfect simple **13** Modal verbs **56**

### The first conditional

is used to talk about hypothetical situations that are likely to happen.

PRESENT SIMPLE

If I practice really hard, this song will sound great.

"WILL" + BASE FORM



### The third conditional

is used to talk about hypothetical situations that definitely will not happen. The result is no longer possible because of the imaginary cause in the past.

PAST PERFECT

If I had practiced more, I would have sounded better.

"WOULD" + "HAVE" + PAST PARTICIPLE



## COMMON MISTAKES USING OTHER TENSES IN CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

"Will," "would," and "would have" should not be used in the "if" clause when forming conditional sentences.

If I **will** work really hard, this piece will sound great. ❌

↖ "Will" doesn't go in the "if" clause.

If I **would** practice more, that piece would sound better. ❌

↖ "Would" doesn't go in the "if" clause.

If I **would have** practiced more, I would have sounded better. ❌

↖ "Would have" doesn't go in the "if" clause.

# 32 Future possibilities

There are many ways to talk about imaginary future situations. Different structures can be used to indicate whether a situation is likely or unlikely.

See also:

Present simple **1** Past simple **7**

Past perfect simple **13**

## 32.1 LIKELY FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

"What if" or "suppose" followed by the present tense can be used to express a future outcome that is likely to happen.

"What if" means "what would happen if an imagined situation occurred?"

**What if**  
**Suppose**

I **fail** my exams? I won't be able to go to college.

Present tense shows the speaker believes this is likely to happen.

"Suppose" refers to the consequences of an imagined situation.



### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**What if** the computer **crashes**?  
I will lose all my work.

**Suppose** they **assess** our coursework.  
We will have to keep a portfolio.

## 32.2 UNLIKELY FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

"What if" or "suppose" followed by the past simple can be used to express a future outcome that is possible, but unlikely to happen.

Just imagine! **What if**  
**Suppose** we all **got** 100% on our exams?

The past tense shows the speaker thinks this is unlikely to happen.



### FURTHER EXAMPLES

**Suppose** I **got caught** cheating.  
My parents would be furious.

**What if** our flight **was canceled**?  
We'd be stuck here!



### 32.3 THINGS THAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED

"What if" and "suppose" can also be used with the past perfect to describe situations that were possible in the past, but that didn't happen, or might not have happened.



That was so dangerous! { What if  
Suppose } you **had broken** your leg?

The past perfect shows that this didn't happen, but it was possible.

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

We were lucky to catch that plane!  
**What if** it **hadn't been** delayed?

**Suppose** you **had taken** the job.  
We would have had to move.

### 32.4 IN CASE

"In case" or "just in case" plus the present tense are used to show planning for a possible future situation.

Make sure the windows are shut  
**in case** the cat **tries** to escape.



Present tense.

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

You should take an umbrella with you **in case** it **rains** later.

We should start organizing our project work, **just in case** they **want** to see it.

You should write these instructions down **in case** you **forget** what to do.

You should leave for the airport early, **just in case** the traffic **is** bad.

"Just" is added to "in case" to talk about preparation for a situation that is less likely.

# 33 Wishes and regrets

English uses the verb “wish” to talk about present and past regrets. The tense of the verb that follows “wish” affects the meaning of the sentence.

See also:

Past simple 7 Past perfect simple 13

Modal verbs 56

## 33.1 “WISH” AND PAST SIMPLE

“Wish” is used with the past simple to express regrets and desires about the present, which could still happen or come true.

I **wish** I **earned** more money.

The past simple is used here to talk about the present.



## FURTHER EXAMPLES

Mike’s apartment is too small. He **wishes** he **lived** in a bigger house.



They **wish** the weather **was** better so they could go to the beach.



You’re always busy, I **wish** you **didn’t have to** work so hard.



Sandra hates her job. She **wishes** she **worked** on a farm.



## HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

“WISH”

SUBJECT

PAST SIMPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

I

**wish**

I

**earned**

**more money.**

“Wish” or “wishes,” depending on the subject.

The past simple expresses wishes or regrets about the present.

### 33.2 "WISH" AND PAST PERFECT

"Wish" is used with the past perfect to talk about regrets about the past. This form is used when it is too late for the wish to come true.



I've failed my exams. I **wish** I **had studied** harder.

The past perfect is used to talk about a regret in the past.

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

He's very tired. He **wishes** he **had gone** to bed early last night.



My car's useless! I **wish** I **hadn't bought** such an old one.



Jo is really bored. She **wishes** she **had gone out** with her friends.



We're totally lost! I **wish** we **had brought** a map.



I **wish** I **had known** how big this dress was before I bought it.



There was a meteor shower last night. I **wish** I **had seen** it.



#### HOW TO FORM



"Wish" or "wishes," depending on the subject.

The past perfect expresses regrets about the past.



### 33.3 "WISH" FOR FUTURE HOPES

"Wish" can also be used to talk about hopes for the future. "Wish" with "could" is usually used when someone is expressing a desire to do something themselves.

I **wish** I **could** move somewhere warm.

[I would like to be able to move somewhere warmer.]



"Wish" with "would" is used when someone is expressing a desire for someone else to do something.

She **wishes** her teacher **would** give her less work.

[She wants her teacher to give out less homework in the future.]



#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

I **wish** I **could** get a new job in a different department.



Colin is always talking about cars. I **wish** he **would** stop.



I **wish** I **could** go to the concert with my friends this evening.



I **wish** they **wouldn't** make it so hard to buy tickets online.



Irene **wishes** she **could** find her diamond necklace.



Jenny's mother **wishes** she **would** clean her room.



Matteo **wishes** he **could** play the violin.



Noel **wishes** Adrienne **would** stop singing.



He **wishes** he **could** understand his homework.



Madge **wishes** Greg **wouldn't** drive so fast.



### 33.4 ANOTHER WAY TO SAY "I WISH"

#### PRESENT REGRETS

Stronger regrets about the present can be expressed by using "if only" and the past simple.



These mountains are incredible!  
**If only I knew** how to ski.

#### PAST REGRETS

Stronger regrets about the past can be expressed by using "if only" and the past perfect.



I really wanted to take pictures.  
**If only I'd charged** the battery.

#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

I love the sound of the guitar.  
**If only I played** it better.

I'm sure the teacher explained this. **If only I remembered** it!

The show is completely sold out!  
**If only I'd arrived** sooner.

I couldn't finish the marathon.  
**If only I had trained** harder.

### 33.5 PAST REGRETS

"Should have" or "ought to have" are used to express regret that something did or didn't happen in the past.

This bill is so big. I { **should have**  
**ought to have** } **used** less electricity.

Past participle.



#### FURTHER EXAMPLES

Maybe I **should have** used energy-saving light bulbs.



The negative form "ought not to have" is rarely used in UK English and never used in US English.

I **shouldn't have** fallen asleep with the TV on.

